AMERICA'S FIRST DECLARATION of INDEPENDENCE

OFFICIALLY RECOGNIZED AFTER One Hundred and Thirty-one Years

MECKLENBURG COUNTY, North Carolina, begins next Sunday the annual celebration of its independence. To the rest of the United States July 4 may be Independence Day—and Mecklenburg county joins good-naturedly in the celebration. But for itself Mecklenburg claims—and with some show of reason—to have been independent of Great Britain for over a year longer than any other part of the United States, basing her contention on the much-discussed but never officially recognized Mecklenburg declaration of independence.

This year it is officially recognized for the first time. President Roosevelt has ordered a company of cavalry from Fort Myer, a company of marines and the famous Marine Band from Washington, and two companies of infantry from Atlanta, to go to Charlotte to take part in the celebration of the 131st anniversary of Mecklenburg's declaration of independence. Next July the rest of the country will celebrate the 130th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

In thus giving the Mecklenburg declaration official recognition, Roosevelt comes very near to accusing Thomas Jefferson of plagiarism. For more than a century the Mecklenburg declaration has been in dispute, and Thomas Jefferson was, when the question first arose, most vehement in denouncing its authenticity. There appears to have been good reason why he should take this position, for the Declaration of Independence of which he was the author was the same in part as that of Mecklenburg, and as the Mecklenburg document antedated the Philadelphia one by more than a year, Jefferson would be shown to be a copyist and not the originator of some of the most stirring sentences in the Philadelphia declaration if he admitted what was claimed by the Mecklenburg advocates.

The Mecklenburg Declaration

Here, briefly, is the history of the "Mecklenburg declaration," which takes its name from the fact that Charlotte, where the convention which promulgated it was held, is in Mecklenburg county—a county which was, in 1775, inhabited almost entirely by people of Scotch-Irish blood, descendants of pioneers of independent spirit who emigrated to America in the Eighteenth Century and drifted down through New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Maryland till they arrived in the rich Piedmont section of North Carolina, the county seat, now a prosperous little city of 20,000 inhabitants, was then a scattered village of perhaps twenty houses, in an agricultural community, simple in its tastes and plain in its living, but which had in it men of considerable intellect and polish.

In the months of March and April, 1775, the country was in a generally disturbed condition. The excavations of the British crown were becoming exasperating. Meetings were held in which the leading men of the community voiced their opposition to the alleged right of Parliament to impose taxes and regulate the internal policy of the colonies. At one of these meetings Col. Thomas Polk, commandant of the county militia, was instructed to send a message to each captain of militia asking that two men be elected from each company to be delegates to a general meeting to be held at Charlotte on the 19th of May. They met upon the day appointed. They were addressed by prominent citizens, who spoke of the purpose of the meeting and recited a list of the wrongs they had suffered at the hands of the crown. While this meeting was in session the news of the battle of Lexington, which had taken place in Massachusetts on April 19, arrived. The impression this news created was profound. The throng of spectators who had gathered from all over the surrounding country immediately became widely excited and there were loud cries of "Independence! Let us declare our independence!" This news of the spilling of blood at Lexington served to confirm the intention of the delegates. There was now but one things left to do.

Abraham Alexander and John McKnitt Alexander, both men of standing, were elected respectively chairman and clerk. Dr. Ephraim Brevard, a graduate of Princeton College, had drawn up resolutions some time before. He now presented them to the meeting, with amendments, as follows:

"I. Resolved, That whosoever directly or indirectly abets or in any way, form or manner countenances the invasion of our rights, as attempted by the parliament of Great Britain, is an enemy to his country, to America, and to the rights of man.

"II. Resolved, That we, the citizens of Mecklenburg county, do hereby dissolve the political bonds which have connected us with the mother country, and absolve ourselves from all allegiance to the British crown, abjuring all politcal connection with a nation that has wantonly trampled on our rights and liberties and inhumanly shed innocent blood of Americans at Lexington.

"Are, and of Right Ought to Be"

"III. Resolved, That we do hereby declare ourselves a free and independent people; that we are, and of right ought to be, a sovereign and self-governing people under the power of God and the general congress; to the maintenance of which independence we solemnly pledge to each other our mutual co-operation, our lives, our fortunes and our most sacred honor.

"IV. Resolved, That we hereby ordain and adopt as rules of conduct all and each of our former laws, and that the crown of Great Britain cannot be considered hereafter as holding any rights, privileges or immunities amongst us.

"V. Resolved, That all officers, both civil and military, in this county, be entitled to exercise the same powers and authorities as heretofore; that every member of this delegation shall henceforth be a civil officer and exercise the powers of a justice of the peace, issue process, hear and determine controversies according to the law, preserve peace, union and harmony in the county, and use every endeavor to spread the love of liberty and of country until a more general and better organized system of government be established.

"VI. Resolved, That a copy of these resolutions be transmitted by express to the President of the Continental Congress assembled in Philadelphia, to be laid before that body."

These resolutions were unanimously adopted and subscribed by all the delegates present at 2 a. m., May 20, 1775. They were then read to the crowds assembled in the village, who welcomed them with hurrahs and enthusiastic shouts, which is why the good people of Charlotte get together every year and celebrate on May 20 the anniversary of the first American Declaration of Independence.

Captain Jack, a hotel keeper in Charlotte, a few days later was dispatched on horseback to Philadelphia, where a copy of the resolutions was placed in the hands of the President of Congress and copies were delivered to the three delegates in Congress from North Carolina. Congress cautiously approved of the resolutions, but deemed the action a little "premature." Congress was conservative. It was going very slow. It was not at all sure that it wanted to break with the mother country. It was, according to Martin's History, "actually preparing a petition to King George III, which was subsequently subscribed by every member on July 8, 1775, declaring, 'We have not raised armies with the ambitious design of separating from Great Britain and establishing independent States.'"

Set Up Independent Government

Charlotte, according to the same authority, immediately set up a provisional government. "The delegates at Charlotte being empowered to adopt such measures as in their opinion would best promote the common cause, established a variety of regulations for managing the concerns of the county. Courts of justice were held under direction of the delegates. For some months these courts were held at Charlotte; but for the convenience of the people—for at that time Cabarrus formed part of Mecklenburg—two other places were selected, and the courts were held at each in rotation. The delegates appointed a committee of their body, who were called 'a committee of safety,' and they were empowered to examine all persons brought before them charged with being inimical to the common cause, and to send the military into the neighborhood counties to arrest suspected persons."

In the early days of the nineteenth century, notwithstanding the fact that there were men living who attended as delegates, it was denied that any such meeting as that at Charlotte had been held, and there were many persons who scoffed at the mention of the Mecklenburg Declaration. Those who testified to being at the meeting then found themselves in a rather awkward position, because there was no documentary evidence to support them. This was because all the records pertaining to the meeting and the original copy of the declaration were burned with the home of the secretary, John McKnitt Alexander, in April, 1800.

The opposition to the belief in the authenticity of the Mecklenburg Declaration was led by Jefferson. In 1819 a duplicate of what is known as "the Davie copy" of the resolutions was printed in the Raleigh (N. C.) Register. It was widely copied and commented upon by the newspapers of the land, who expressed surprise that it had not been more widely heralded. Among the papers that copied it was the Essex (Mass.) Register, an issue of which fell into the hands of John Adams. He immediately mailed it to Jefferson, with the following remarks:

"You know that if I had possessed it I would have made the halls of Congress to echo and re-echo with it fifteen months before your Declaration of Independence. What a poor, ignorant, malicious, crapulous mass is Tom Paine's 'Common Sense' in comparison with this paper. Had I known it, I would have commented upon it from the day you entered Congress until the Fourth of July, 1776."

Jefferson's reply was: "You seem to think it genuine. I believe it spurious. I deem it to be a very unjustifiable quiz."

Made Jefferson Indignant

Jefferson is said to have been not a little nettled at the comments throughout the country regarding the remarkable similarity in phraseology between the Mecklenburg Declaration and the Fourth of July Declaration a year later, of which he was the author. In fact, some went so far as to accuse Jefferson of plagiarism.

On the face of it the charge seems reasonable. Not that there are any actual sentences from the Mecklenburg Declaration reproduced in the Philadelphia Declaration. But there are several places where the sentiments and phrasing of the two are so absolutely identical as to suggest to the impartial reader that whoever wrote the later of the two had certainly seen the former; and that while not consciously plagiarizing perhaps, certain telling and well-turned phrases lingered in his memory.

In the second of the Mecklenburg resolutions occur the words "dissolve the political bonds, which have connected us with the mother country"—almost identical with a phrase in the famous preamble to the Philadelphia Declaration. And a certain familiar phrase in the Jefferson document, "that these United Colonies are and of right ought to be free and independent States" rings reminiscent of the third of Dr. Brevard's resolutions; while the closing words, "we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor," are "lifted" bodily from the Mecklenburg to the Philadelphia document.

In the absence of actual documents historians have given scant attention to the assertions of the Mecklenburg people, but some evidence which has recently been discovered, particularly the record in the Moravian Church at Salem, N. C., makes it appear that to Mecklenburg must go all the credit its people claim.

For the last five years Prof. Alexander Graham, Dr. George Graham and R. O. Alexander, three Charlotte citizens, have been collecting evidence to prove that the convention was held at Charlotte and that a declaration of independence was signed. The evidence they discovered is as follows:

A poem or piece of doggerel written in 1777, which refers to "Mecklenburg's fantastic rabble

"In Charlotte in giddy council."

The deeds still in the Mecklenburg county courthouse, dated from the Mecklenburg declaration. For instance: "This indenture made the 13th day of February, 1779, and in the fourth year of our independence."

The Original Was Burned

Martin's History of North Carolina, written 1791 to 1879, in which the author cites contemporary documents and records as authorities for his account of the Mecklenburg declaration.

Major Garden's "Anecdotes of the American Revolution," whose author personally knew Col. Thomas Polk and other Mecklenburg soldiers.

The schoolboy's declamation, delivered in 1909 at Sugar Creek Church, three miles from Charlotte. It begins: "On the 19th of May, 1775, a day sacredly exulting to every Mecklenburg bosom, two delegates duly authorized from every militia company in this county met in Charlotte."

"The Davie copy" of the Declaration, written out from memory by John McKnitt Alexander after the burning of the original manuscript in his home.

The Bethania records of the Moravian Church, preserved at Salem, N. C. These records, written in German script, have been carefully kept every year from 1755 to 1906. A page covering the events of the year 1775 begins as follows:

"At the end of 1775 I cannot omit to mention that already in the summer of the same year—that is to say, in May, June, or July—the county of Mecklenburg, in North Carolina, did declare itself free and independent from England, and did make such dispositon for the administration of law as later on the Continental Congress established for the whole. But this proceeding Congress looked upon as too premature."

An account of a Fourth of July celebration held in Charlotte in 1808 printed in the Raleigh Register of July 28, 1808. A toast at a banquet was as follows: "By Joseph Pearson—The patriots of Mecklenburg, the first to declare independence. May their sons be the last to acknowledge themselves slaves.'"

Known to Lafayette

That Lafayette had heard of the Mecklenburg declaration, and believed thoroughly that it antedated that adopted in Philadelphia was evident from the toast he offered when entertained at a public dinner in the governor's mansion at Raleigh, the capital of North Carolina, on March 2, 1825: "The State of North Carolina, its metropolis, and the 20th of May, 1775, when a generous people called for independence and freedom, of which may they more and more forever cherish the principles and enjoy the blessings."

It seems probable that future historians will give more space to the Mecklenburg claims than they have been wont to receive, and more credence than Jefferson was willing to allow them. Roosevelt's action in sending United States troops to take part in the celebration, which is practically an official recognition of the truth of Mecklenburg's contetnion, was foreshadowed in a speech delivered at Raleigh during the President's Southern trip last fall. He said then:

"It was in North Carolina that the Mecklenburg Declaration of Independence foreshadowed the course taken in a few short months by the representatives of the thirteen colonies assembled in Philadelphia. North Carolina can rightfully say that she pointed us the way which led us to the formation of the new nation."

His action now is merely additional evidence of the Presidential habit of standing by his beliefs.

THOMAS JEFFERSON
AUTHOR OF THE SECOND AND ACCEPTED DECLARATION

GOVERNOR GLENN
OF NORTH CAROLINA,
WHO WILL PRESIDE AT
NEXT SUNDAY'S CELEBRATION

Col. THOMAS POLK,
WHO CALLED THE
MECKLENBURG CONVENTION.
MAY 19, 1775.

Men Who Have Lived in the Shadow of Death

WILLIAMSON, the head of Scotland Yard, once declared that the most nerve-racking test a man could be put to was the dread of assassination. Some men who were the bravest in war and in meeting an open foe were tortured almost to the point of breaking down by the dread of secret, lurking, sudden death. During his experience at Scotland Yard it was some times his disagreeable duty to convey to certain personages the intimation that their lives were in danger and to take steps to insure their safety.

At the present time, perhaps, the most interesting person whose life is in danger from the assassin is Count Witte, the great Russian statesman. The blow is dreaded from a secret source, not from the ordinary quarter from which have emanated so many Russian murders of high personages. The count is surrounded by faithful servants, who guard him wherever he goes; his rooms are searched for hidden intruders and his food is carefully tested for poison. The count himself laughs at all precautions and refuses to take any for himself. Inured to dangers, he seems not to care what happens to him.

"Pah! I do my best and will take what comes," he exclaimed to one who expostulated with him on his rashness.

The nonchalance of Count Witte has had its counterpart in many of our own modern statesmen, who have at times had the disagreeable experience of knowing their lives were threatened.

Mr. Balfour, when chief secretary for Ireland, made himself so obnoxious to a small section of desperate conspirators that his life was in danger for several months. Scotland Yard looked after him most vigilantly. Detectives hovered around him, scoured the streets in front of him and followed him at a distance, ready for any eventuality. He persisted in maintaining that "the bother" was quite unnecessary and after a first protest against it seemed to dismiss all thought of it from his mind. As to giving any intimation to the detectives as to where he was going, when he would go or what he was about, such an idea never appeared to occur to him. He would walk out of his office wrapt in deep thought and proceed calmly through the streets, obstacles of every one near him. A dozen desperate men might have been at his elbow and he would not have regarded them or recognized their presence.

Threats to assassinate Mr. Gladstone worried him considerably. He never, however, had the slightest fear of assassination. It was the police precautions that worried him. They made him wretched and irritable. He could never forget that there were detectives watching over him. He was most courteous and kindly to those who had the responsible duty to perform, but he could not resist the temptation to give them the slip whenever it was possible.

He used to escape from the room by a convenient private door or—at Hawarden—by one of the windows reaching to the lawn and go off for an hour or so's ramble by himself, free from watchers. His hat hanging on a peg in the hall was no guarantee that its owner was indoors. That hat fooled many a detective, while Gladstone was calmly walking the streets outside in a hat he had secretly smuggled in. At Hawarden he walked the detectives thin whose duty it was to keep him in sight on his rambles.

There were others who were not possessed of such a fearless courage. The health of one Irish secretary was known to have been wrecked by plots made against his life, which were only defeated by the cleverness of Scotland Yard. Another home secretary was driven to resignation by them.

The immense nerve of Napoleon III is said to have been broken by the threats of an Italian secret revolutionary society to take his life. For years the Emperor lived, as it were, on the brink of a volcano. His life was not worth a month's purchase. Myriads of police spies brought in daily reports of plots to assassinate him and he drove about in a specially constructed carriage, the sides of which were secretly plated with iron. One night as he and the Empress Eugenie were proceeding to the opera house a miscreant threw a bomb beneath the carriage, which exploded, scattering death and wounds all around.

The Emperor and Empress escaped miraculously and appeared in their box at the opera as calmly as if nothing had happened. That night when all was still at the Tuileries one of the attendants saw the Emperor softly gliding to the room where the prince imperial lay asleep. The Emperor stood beside the sleeping boy and bent over him, while the tears coursed down his face as he looked at the child; then he slipped back to his own room as softly as he had come. From that day the terror of sudden death lay on him heavily.

Gordon's life was often in the direst peril from murderous hands in different parts of the world. He scorned all ideas of protecting himself and declared that when Providence ceased to protect him he was ready to fall. Upon more than one occasion persons who sought to murder him were completely disarmed by the noble presence and wonderful calm of the man.

Burke, the Irish under secretary at Dublin castle, who met his death with Lord Frederick Cavendish in Phoenix Park under the daggers of Carey's assassins, was a man who was dogged by death for a long time. He laughed at all threats, absolutely refused to be guarded and would carry nothing but a slight walking cane.

James Carey, the man who organized the murders of Burke and Cavendish, and then sought to secure safety by turning informer against his less guilty and deluded associates, was terrified nearly to madness when he learned that he was marked for death by some of their friends.

Scotland Yard faithfully fulfilled its promise to do all it could to secure his safety. He was kept in hiding, disguised, guarded, smuggled out of the country on a steamer. The detectives watched over their loathsome charge with lynx-eyed vigilance, but Carey saw death in every shadow, trembled at the approach of innocent strangers and broke into paroxysms of abject terror.

His presentiments proved to be correct. There was one passenger on board the vessel that conveyed Carey away, of whom alone he had no fear. That was the man who, when the vessel one day drew near its destination, suddenly leveled his revolver and shot Carey dead. They had just before been playing a game of cards together.

The sovereign who is most miserable through a dread of assassination today is the Sultan. No one perhaps knows what good cause he may have for fear. People who have come face to face with him have noted the strange terror in his eyes which tells the story of how he is haunted. He appears like one gazing at some unknown horror. He does not know what stealthy thing may come upon him. Yet in actual danger he is brave enough. When his palace was shaken by an earthquake that sent the courtiers flying in all directions to escape from the walls that threatened to crush him and them, the Sultan sat calmly in his chair and betrayed not the slightest fear—indeed a smile lit up the dark somber face as he noted the fright of his companions. He was amused.